

Should President Obama Be More Optimistic?

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Posted: February 21, 2009 | 06:15 AM (EST)

In the last few days voices as disparate as John McCain's speechwriter, Mark McKinnon, and former President Bill Clinton have suggested to President Obama that he put a more optimistic mien on his presidency. I suspect that Bill Clinton's advice is meant to be constructive and, other than contemplating the colossal chutzpah of anybody associated with John McCain telling anybody to be optimistic, I cannot speculate on McKinnon's motive.

At first cut, this advice sounds right because American history suggests that presidential optimists such as Roosevelt, Reagan and Clinton tend to be more successful than presidential pessimists, notably Carter and George W. Bush. This is not a hard rule, but just a trend. Nonetheless, Reagan's cheerful, morning in America disposition allowed him to remain well liked virtually throughout his presidency in spite of some of his views and policies being quite unpopular. Reagan's popularity on the heels of Carter's discussions of national malaise is quite instructive in this regard. Similarly, Franklin D. Roosevelt was much more successful with his approach of "we have nothing to fear but fear itself" than George W. Bush and Dick Cheney were with their approach that might be summed up with the line from the advertising posters from the 1980s remake of *The Fly* "Be Afraid, be very afraid."

For Obama the question of whether he should be more optimistic is somewhat different, and not just because the current economic situation is uniquely dire. To some extent this is a matter of style. Obama doesn't need to be more optimistic because he already is so essentially forward-looking and hopeful. In addition to being a young president with a young, happy family and confident, unflappable disposition, Obama's election, in the midst of this economic crisis, was itself a major triumph of optimism, for many the first such triumph during a particularly gloomy period in our history. Accordingly, Obama has an enormous reservoir of optimism on which he can draw. His presidency is based around the notion of hope. If he was more explicit about this feeling, constantly making upbeat predictions about the economy, or other overt statements of optimism, he would risk sounding foolish and lacking in seriousness and gravitas.

A more practical reason for Obama to avoid being too optimistic is that raising expectations would be very damaging for him and his party. As the party in control of the executive and both houses of congress, the Democrats will be held responsible by voters for our economic recovery. The chances of a meaningful economic turnaround by the midterm elections, or perhaps even the next presidential election, are not good almost regardless of what the Obama administration does. Therefore, the party's future success depends on Obama being frank about economic realities with the American people. Obama would do well, to borrow a phrase from George Wallace, to keep the expectations so low even the goats can get them.

If Obama is truly committed to change, being more optimistic may not help him in that effort. Americans voted for Obama because they were acutely aware of the problems the country faces.

If, in the first months of his presidency, Obama were to begin minimizing those problems and saying things are getting better, it might actually undermine his chances of continuing legislative success. One or two bills, even big ones, will not be enough to solve our problems, for Obama to suggest otherwise would not be optimistic; it would be disingenuous.

The current economic crisis is not simply due to a lack of consumer and investor confidence, although that is part of the problem. There are broader structural problems that need to be addressed and decades of bad policies that need to get reversed. As difficult and depressing as it is to believe, the economy probably still needs to get worse before it can get better. Americans are well served by a president who understands that and conducts himself accordingly.

The lesson that Obama should take from Roosevelt, Reagan and even Winston Churchill is not optimism, but resolve. The key message from Obama should not be that things aren't as bad as they seem or that we are about to turn the corner, but that it may take time, and it will not be easy, but that we will right our economy and get back on our feet. It is hard to imagine a president who understands the true strength of America and the truly unique opportunities this country can offer better than Barack Obama. Barack Obama does not need to be reminded, by anybody, of the extraordinary resilience of the US, and of its people, but he should not be misleading anybody by avoiding the difficult truths about what is really occurring, how we got to this point or what it will take to right our economy.